Good Friday Candlelight Service April 8, 1966

THE DYING CHRIST

A few short months ago we celebrated the coming of the light into the world. In the darkness of a candlelight service such as this, we re-enacted the coming of light in the birth of Jesus Christ. We lighted our candles and symbolically felt the warmth of God's love in our midst. We recalled the words from the Gospel according to John, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

But this evening we assemble here to observe the death of Jesus Christ. Using the metaphor further - we are here to remember that day in history when the light of the world was snuffed out. What happened to Him? What happened over the brief course of 33 years - that one born amidst such goodness and love should die so shamefully - so ingloriously?

Through the eyes of faith we see one who was light - one who shined a bright ray of pure light into the dark corners of men's lives. Perhaps it was too bright - too pure; perhaps men prefer not to be made so transparent.

He offered those about him a new life - and they rejected him.

He taught that authentic life was found in loving their neighbors. Their response was to hate and despise him.

He said that the truly blessed man is the peacemaker, the merciful - and they answered him with cynical cruelty.

He embodied a new life - a new glorious dimension of life, and he paid for it with his death.

In the otherwise dark stream of human experience - he was light - and they executed him.

What happened? Who were the men who did it? Who are the impersonal "they" who committed this dastardly deed? - this "towering crime of history".

The Negro Spiritual eloquently answers - "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" You see, the really disturbing factor in the crucifixion drama is the fact that the "they" represents the common, ordinary, good people of the day - people like you and me. They were not Godless, immoral leachers. In fact, they were pious people - people who prayed in the Temple: people devoted to their religion and their way of life. They were the leaders - the priests and scribes and pharisees; the responsible people in whom public trust was lodged.

Harry Emerson Fosdick summed it up articulately when he said, "We were there; in a deep sense we are there. All the major factors in that tragedy involve you and me. The blindness of religious leaders who cannot see a new and larger truth; the selfishness of a business community that does not want the profitable traffice in the Temple disturbed; the disloyalty of Judas, who was more for himself than for Christ; the political shrewdness of Pilate, who does his best to free Jesus but finding it costs too much, washes his hands of it; the emotionalism of the crown, stirred by effective propoganda, to cry for they know not what; the cowardice of the disciples who ran away. Who of us was not there?

This is what happened. Men curcified God incarnate; men who ought to remain nameless and faceless - because upon close examination - surely we would find ourselves in their midst. They are our brothers in the family of man - and we have no reason to believe that we would have reacted any differently to the presence of Jesus Christ in our midst than they did.

Were this all there was to say - it would be a day of utter gloom and shame. Were this the whole story, we would do well to feel guilty, to confess and confess again - our involvement in the crucifixion.

But it is not all. Something else happened; someone else was also responsible for his death. That someone is God. He willed the crucifixion - He cameto die. Even in the act of dying, he took upon himself the terrible burden of the guilty - for he looked down and forgave them. And so we dare to call it Good Friday - this day in which we find ourselves so intimately involved. Good Friday - because God was there - because the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is not so much man's way with God as it is God's eternal way with man.

His intent was to redeem man; to heal the breech which exists; to give men a new life. And for this he came; for this he suffered; and for this he died.

"Is it nothing to all ye that pass by?" It is this --God is with us even in death. Jesus Christ dying that you and I might know his love - the lengths to which that love will go for our sakes.

Why did it happen? What does it mean? Listen again to the words of the beautiful hymn we have been singing:

"Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.
Twas I , Lord Jesus, I it was denied Thee:
I crucified Thee."
"Therefore, kind Jesus, since I cannot pay thee,
I do adore thee, and will ever pray thee,
Think on thy pity and thy love unswerving,
Not my deserving."

Amen.

Almight God, Father Everlasting, who sent thy son Jesus Christ to live and die for us and for all men; Be near to us in this hour of meditation. Open our hearts to the shattering significance of this day. Give us understanding to comprehend the power of the death we have remembered. Let a portion of the Spirit,which led our Saviour to the cross, descend upon us and fill our hearts with the love of God and man. Cleanse our hearts of every selfishness - grant us faith - and may thy peace which passeth all understanding keep our thoughts in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.